

The Klan



*The Fiery Cross
Returns to
Maryland*

By Patsy Sims / Photographed by Bill Snead

IT looked like an ordinary black box, the kind many families used to store “valuables” before safe-deposit boxes came into vogue. I was six, at the most, when I discovered it in a bedroom closet. Inside was a nostalgic kaleidoscope of fading photographs, telegrams, yellow clippings and other memorabilia: a snapshot of Great-Grandpa Valentine Hans, prosperously vested, his white hair and mustache trim, his boots thirsty for polish; Grandma Sims’ tortoise-shell comb and strands of her silvering hair; my father’s pass to the 1928 Democratic National Convention, and a picture-postcard of fifty or so robed and hooded men marching down Main Street in Beaumont, Texas, in the early Twenties.

That was my introduction to the Ku Klux Klan. I was too young to know the name, or what it stood for or did. Yet again and again, I studied that browning photograph, as though I might eventually discover a clue as to who they were and what they were like and why they were marching with their faces masked.

Over the years, the questions grew with me and within me. Especially in the Sixties, when violence spread like kudzu across the Southern countryside, when Alabama and Mississippi became sinister and frightening to me in the same mysterious way that darkness frightens a child. Just as the postcard had seized my imagination, so did the news accounts and pho-

so did the news accounts and photographs of men accused of murdering three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi; men accused of gunning down Viola Liuzzo on a lonely road outside Selma; men accused of slugging Freedom Riders with pipes and nightsticks and leaded bats; men accused of bombing and burning churches and synagogues and homes.

I am from the South. Born and raised and lived there most of my life. I remember when everything—water fountains, restrooms, depots, even churches—was labeled “Colored” and “White.” Nobody asked “Why?” I remember the before, the during, the after when the labels merged and the “dividers” on streetcars and buses disappeared. As a journalist in south Louisiana, I came to know many blacks, the traditional victims of the

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Klan, from bootblacks to legislators, from prostitutes to debutantes.

But I never got to know a klansman. I never met one—that I was aware of—nor knew anyone who had. Then, I didn't know that Beaumont, where my family lived until I was ten, had made some of the biggest Klan headlines in the Twenties, that Beaumont Klavern No. 7 had gone in for whipping and tar-and-feathering, and worse, and counted among its members the mayor and the district attorney.

Then, I didn't know that my father had joined the Klan, once. Back in the Twenties, back when everyone was joining. Harry Truman. Hugo Black. Politicians. Sheriffs. Lawyers. Businessmen. Ordinary working folks, like my father. Four or five million, altogether. More up North, historians say, than down South. Ohio, with 400,000, boasted the largest membership in the Invisible Empire, as the Klan still refers to its domain. Pennsylvania had an estimated 100,000, a

third of them in Philadelphia.

Indiana elected a Klansman as governor and another to the United States Senate. Those were the days when the Klan often determined a politician's fate, when it marched 40,000 strong down Pennsylvania Avenue, when it was rumored—and denied—to have held initiations on the Capitol steps and in the White House, and when an anti-Klan platform turned the 1924 Democratic National Convention into fist-swinging pandemonium and lost by one vote.

But my father was never a part of any of that. He never owned a robe or a hood or a membership card, because he never went back after he and a hundred others were initiated at the East Texas State Fair Grounds. He soon cringed as the Klan took law and order and morals into its own hands, and flogged and lynched and tarred-and-feathered, and fed screaming victims through rock grinders. Their victims, white as often as black in those

days, included anyone, anything the Klan didn't like: Negroes, Jews, Catholics, Orientals, Mormons, immigrants, drugs, liquor, marital "goings-on," Franklin D. Roosevelt and Louisiana's all-powerful Huey P. Long.

The Klan was not designed to hate, originally, when six young Confederate veterans gathered on Christmas Eve 1865 in a Pulaski, Tennessee, law office and decided to form a club to relieve their postwar boredom. To celebrate, the men raided the linen closet, draped themselves and their horses in sheets and paraded through town. Soon, the nocturnal appearances evolved from innocent to violent, spreading across the Reconstruction-torn South, halted only when Congress passed in 1871 a series of civil rights laws, known informally as the Ku Klux Klan Acts and resurrected during the turbulent Sixties.

Even "Colonel" William Joseph Simmons, who coordinated his revival of the Klan in 1915 with the Atlanta

opening of "Birth of a Nation," initially saw it as another venture in his long career of fraternal organizing. When he teamed up with the Southern Publicity Association, it was to build the renamed "Knights of the Ku Klux Klan" and to make money. They achieved both goals, in startling figures, during a revival which lasted until the Klan was hit by the Depression and a \$685,000 federal back-tax bill.

Until recently, most people probably thought klansmen and crossburnings were skeletons relegated to this country's closet. If asked, they probably would have said the five million members from the Twenties, the estimated 30,000 to 40,000 who joined when court-ordered integration came to schools and lunch counters and public transportation in the Sixties, had died or disappeared or had a change of heart. Then, in 1975 and 1976, the Klan began popping up like crabgrass: throwing its hood into the

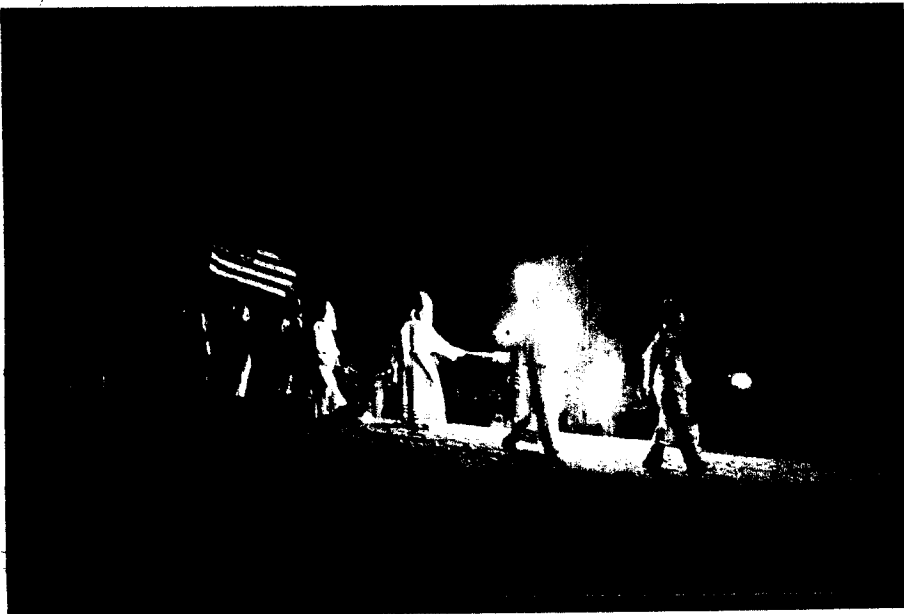
family moves into an all-white area, they *will* receive a warnin'. And this *has* happened. Three months ago, in an all-white section of Baltimore City here, a group of blacks moved in and they were warned to leave, and *they left*."

"Just from this note?"

"From that note and a couple other warnin's. There was a cross burnt. And after the cross was burnt, they left."

Minton lit a cigarette and settled back into the sofa. Heir apparent to the Grand Dragonship of the Maryland Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, he fit the Clint Eastwood tough-guy role to perfection: the leisure suit, the boots, the height, the build, the hair color and cut, the dialogue—especially his line, "We do not use violence unless we have to, but when we have to, *we will*."

Except for half-hourly reminders from a cuckoo clock, the modest house in north Baltimore was quiet on this afternoon in March 1977. Two teenaged girls and a small boy leaned against the kitchen door frame, spell-



bound by their bachelor uncle. Now 30, Minton had moved from North Carolina to Baltimore in 1950 with his parents and an older brother. He had quit school in tenth grade to join the Army and now worked as a chemical technician. Two years ago, he joined the Klan, primarily because it was a way to fight integration.

The "warning" was more polite than some others I had seen that

threatened, "You have just been paid a friendly visit by THE KNIGHTS of the KU KLUX KLAN—THE NEXT ONE WILL BE A REAL ONE." Still, the red type was intimidating, even if it now was intended to educate, not to eliminate.

"Where do you put these?" I asked.

"On their house. On their cars. On *them*, if necessary," he laughed, not as if he found it funny, but to relieve tension. He was serious. Dead serious.

"Do you do this very often?"

Again, Minton produced his serious laugh. "See, you're givin' me a hard question to answer. There's a lot of crossburnings, but the Klan hasn't done 'em all. Now if we deem it necessary, we *will* burn a cross and we *will* show violence if we have to."

I asked Minton if he was referring to the small cross traditionally burned in front yards. "Yeah, it's four-by-six. That's average. Wood wrapped in burlap." A miniature, he explained, of the thirty-to-forty-foot

cross used at rallies.

"What happens after the cross in the yard?"

"The next step," he answered without hesitation, "is the house won't be there, one way or 'nother, if they won't take the first two warnin's."

Had he resorted to that?

"No," he said casually, "they usually come around by the second warnin'. You don't have to go too far."

"How easily *would* you do that?" I pressed.

The morning sun bounced off the living room's orange walls, recreating the glow of the fiery cross, yet Minton remained cool, his answers firm but

controlled. "That would depend on the circumstances. Like I say, we do not use violence unless we have to. But when we have to, *we will.*"

"Have you had to use *any* kind of violence?"

"Yes," he answered, but balked when I asked him to talk about it. "That would be an admission of guilt on my part."

Minton identified the Maryland

Knights of the Ku Klux Klan as one of the dozen or so independents loosely affiliated with Robert Scoggin of South Carolina. According to Minton, he was directing the group, although he was still officially Grand Klaliff, second in command, and would not be Grand Dragon until May 1. Apparently he was involved in a power struggle with Tony LaRicci, the Grand Dragon who had recently been accused of embezzling Klan funds by some of his disgruntled followers. When I asked about other Klan groups in Maryland, he was insistent. "We're the onliest one. If you go to the liberry, you'll see one Post Office box for the Klan in Maryland and that is ours." United Klans of America had a small group in the Rising Sun area, where it rallied in the early Seventies because it was a half mile below the Mason-Dixon line. But Minton never conferred with them; they were "too small."

Will Minton had been reared in a

middle-income family and in the Methodist Church. Now he considered the racial beliefs and feelings he remembered growing up with. "I don't believe anybody in my family likes niggers, basically likes them," he said bluntly. "But my parents, more or less they could tolerate anybody. 'You leave me alone an' I'll leave you alone.' But you see, now, that was back in the Fifties. That was a good time to live."

Although he lumped his own reasons for joining into "the Klan's good ideas," he admitted, "Segregation is Number One. Some other Klan members, they may believe dope peddlers are Number One. Or Communist conspiracy's Number One. But to my opinion, segregation is."

"Are there *any* black people you like at all?" I asked.

"No," he cleared his throat, "I can't

think of one."

"You've never known one in your life that you liked?"

"No, to be honest with you."

"Why do you feel that way?" I probed.

"Because they're inferior. They're very low-class people. I guess I've always felt that way. Matter of fact, I don't even wanta be in the same room with 'em."

But with his hair carefully teased and sprayed, his coordinated suit and shirt, his swaggering manner, I speculated that machismo might more than outweigh his distaste for blacks; that he was motivated by a desire to impress the ladies with his toughness, his bravery, his power—especially in the Grand Dragon's green robe.

"How do the women you date react when they find out you're a klansman?" I asked.

"Most of 'em have nothing to say about it," he answered nonchalantly. "Ever' once in a while, you'll find one that does, but when you do, then you get rid of that one and find another

one. That's all. No problem."

Although Minton would not name the chemical company where he had worked for five years, he said he had had no problems there except with the union, which specifically forbids its members from belonging to the Klan. He resolved that problem, he said, by threatening to sue the union for "discrimination."

Still in the kitchen doorway, the nieces and nephew were engrossed even by the way Minton lit another cigarette and coolly blew out the match.

"Now what my members do, I have *no* authority over," he informed me.

"What do you mean?"

"If I'm not there to watch 'em, I can't guarantee what they're gonna do." He exhaled, watching the smoke mingle with the fire-red sunlight.

"I have heard," I began, "that some leaders—not all leaders, but some leaders—say they would rather not know what's going on. They don't tell

their members *not* to do it . . .”

Minton interrupted. “I’ll tell you just like I tell my people: ‘Do what you want, but don’t tell me what you do.’”

“So in a way, that’s condoning it, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not condoning it. It’s not doin’ anything,” he argued. “It’s just staying out of it one hundred per cent. If a house is burned and they questioned me . . . They’d say, ‘Well, did you know about this?’ I’d say ‘No,’ and I’d be honest in saying ‘no’ because if the members don’t tell me they’re going to do it, I have no authority, no power to stop ‘em. I’m out of it one hundred per cent.”

The Maryland State Police already had described this procedure among Exalted Cyclopes and their Klan higher-ups, and the increased formation since the early Seventies of small “action groups” that operated independently of the leaders and general membership. The police had described them as “very difficult to penetrate,” because the groups were confined to three or four men, specifically to keep out informers. Similar groups—flamboyantly named “Terrors,” “Holy Terrors” and “Execution Squad”—had been blamed for much of the violence during the Civil Rights movement. They, too, had operated under the “Don’t tell me” rule.

I asked Minton if such groups, or Inner Circles, existed in his Klan.

“Every group has ‘em,” he answered emphatically, reiterating that they acted “on their own.”

When I asked if he condoned killing, in view of his earlier prediction that more houses would be burned and more people killed in the future, he detoured, “I did not say there

would be. I said there’s a possibility of it.”

“But how do you feel about the things the Klan was accused of in the Sixties?” I pushed. “For instance, the Philadelphia, Mississippi, incident and the Viola Liuzzo killing—the things that made headlines?”

Minton creased his brow. “You mean like the schoolbus bombings and church burnings?”

“Yes, and the shooting of the woman on the highway,” I prompted.

Oh, that was in Louisiana . . . er, Mississippi?”

“Alabama . . . Selma,” I offered.

“Yeah, okay, gotcha.” He sat back, relieved that he had the facts straight. “Well, first off, she was from

New York, right?”

“No, Detroit.”

“And what was she, a Puerto Rican, I believe?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, she had no business down in

the South with the Freedom Riders and her outside agitation when they had enough agitation down there as it was.”

“But do you think that’s grounds to kill somebody?”

He snickered. “The onliest thing I can tell you, I wouldn’t send her any flowers.”

Was he for real? Or was this an act? I was baffled by Minton’s bizarre openness and his bravado, as the conversation unfolded like a movie script designed to create a superjock image for impressionable females. Was he actually trying to persuade me about something he believed in, a belief he both sanctioned and followed?

“What about the student at the University of Maryland?” I asked.

He was blunt about the charges against Aitcheson. “He was stupid because he was caught. I mean, you do not make a pipe bomb and give it to a fire marshal.”

The Maryland police had pieced together what, at first, seemed like isolated incidents during the spring of 1976 to make its case against Bill Aitcheson: a crossburning at the University, the letter to Coretta King’s home in Atlanta, a bomb threat the night before she spoke on campus, numerous crossburnings in the Washington suburbs. They began to sense that the Klan—dormant in Maryland since the early Seventies—was again on the move; real violence, not mere rhetoric, was in the making; random nightriding had progressed to “structured” violence. They began to connect the increased rallies with the crossburnings and threats, and to take the Klan more seriously.

State membership of UKA, the Maryland Knights and the latest

splinter group added up to no more than two to three hundred. While the Klan appeared to lose one member for each new one, it was recruiting “like mad” in schools, nearby military bases, neighborhood bars, and shopping centers. Cases of “symbolic” violence—designed to damage property

hood clubs.

"This was the only organization that's not super-radical like the American Nazi Party, which I thought was a little *too*, you know?" he explained. "They're not afraid to go out and do anything. But the Klan, they were trying to get it together right, the way I like to do."

A fat, jovial man, his eyes twinkled like Christmas morning. "They are tryin' to make it like it was in the Forties and Fifties, when you was able to walk down the streets at night and nobody bothered you. I remember those days when the little man went up and lit the gas lights, put his ladder up against the pole and lit 'em. I remember the streetcars, and, uh, it was nice." He became defensive. "But it's not nice anymore. Somepin's gotta be done. It's gettin' outta hand. My wife, she's afraid to drive the car at night. And the way the country's runnin' now, it's just not right. Or at least the way I see it. I think everybody else does. The papers prove that."

Al, 27 and single, sat quietly as his companion poured out the the feelings he had struggled with for two years before deciding the Klan was the answer. Smiling again, John

boasted, "I'm glad I joined. I'm proud of it!" He was also proud that he was already an officer, Night-Hawk, a sort of sergeant-at-arms and custodian of the fiery cross.

"The Klan's not the same as it used to be," he said. "People still have the same old image, but it's not the same. The Klan has progressed. Like we let Catholics in and all . . . because I'm a Catholic."

John believed in violence "only when necessary." "When they drive you up against the wall. Any animal'll fight back when it's cornered. But most of the people in the Klan aren't violent. They're just fed up. Myself, I don't know if I could go out and kill a person. But pushed against the wall, you don't know what you'd do."

Al listened shyly, but seemingly in agreement with

John. His shaggy, shoulder-length hair and mustache contrasted with his trim white duck trousers and turtleneck sweater. He wore a red-stoned ring with gold-embossed Army insignia from three years in the military, one of them in Vietnam. Now, he was working part-time as a security guard and studying pre-law. He had joined the Klan about the same time as John.

Will Minton and I lingered between my car and his late-model red and white Cadillac, the Klan's blood-drop emblem decal on the windshield. As we talked, he opened the trunk and tossed his briefcase on top of three yard-size crosses, wrapped in burlap and ready to burn.

The April rally and Minton's installation as Grand Dragon were postponed. In May, his mother called with the message that all rallies were closed to the press until further notice. Summer came and went. There were rumors

that Minton had been "kicked out."

In early September, I learned of a rally in Gamber, Maryland, on September 24, to be attended by William M. Chaney of Indianapolis, Imperial Wizard of the new confederation of independent klans. I finally reached Tony LaRicci, who agreed to an interview and invited me to the rally.

On the rally grounds, LaRicci paced nervously, issuing orders to a half-dozen young men in fatigues or jeans. The ritual small cross was standing; the larger one, re-wrapped in burlap since last night's rally, still lay on the ground.

A small wiry man of 50, LaRicci, freshly dressed in navy slacks and maroon blazer with a blood-drop em-

blem over the left breast pocket in preparation for Bill Chaney's arrival, grabbed a hefty wooden mallet and strode across the field to oversee the erection of the cross.

When the cross was erect, thanks to the struggles of nine men, LaRicci and the others stood back to admire it. The stink of kerosene and gas was overpowering. A blond fellow, wiping his sweaty face on the arm of his tee-shirt, exulted, "She *will* go up tonight!"

Momentarily pleased, LaRicci returned to the podium area, panicking at the first sprinkle from the heavy clouds above. "It *can't* rain! We've got too much invested in this. We've lifted the ban on press coverage—*that's* how important it is!"

"Why has the ban been lifted?" I asked.

"Because *Mister Chaney* is coming." LaRicci blamed the ban on the media's failure to fairly report previous rallies and their attendance. I suspected, however, it had much more to do with the power struggle between him and his second-in-command, Will Minton, and his mem-

...s' accusations of theft, coupled with the charges against his former protege, Bill Aitcheson.

LaRicci had, he said, placed Minton on "indefinite suspension." Because LaRicci's employer was Jewish, he had been afraid that "if my name kept coming out too often it could cost me my job," and had accordingly allowed Minton to act as his group's spokesman. Now, he considered that he had made a mistake, saying that "it sort of went to his [Minton's] head." He also indicated that he had been displeased by Minton's statements which seemed to condone violence.

LaRicci had been described to me as being close to Aitcheson at one time, trying to bring him into line, but now he kept a verbal distance. "Aitcheson . . . if he did it while he belonged to this organization, it was against our bylaws, and I had no knowledge of it. Because, even though we do have a training program . . ."

"The Klan Berets?" I interposed.

He nodded. "It did not exist with the knowledge of any explosives of any kind.

Simulations, yes. This they were authorized to do. They could do such things as a smoke bomb, but not explosives themselves."

Born in Norfolk, Virginia, LaRicci lived in New Jersey until he was ten and since then in Baltimore. He and his wife were separated but not divorced and had five sons and a daughter, their youngest child aged 17. He had been laid off two months ago from his job as a maintenance mechanic.

LaRicci had had run-ins with blacks before he joined the United Klans in 1963. He even sold his house—at a loss, he said—when blacks began moving into his all-white neighborhood.

"I've been taken to court a couple times, for arguing with Negroes. If it wasn't over a dog, it was over kids or this or that. In fact, I remember one remark a Negro made in court to the judge—I happened to have a corner home, right on the corner—and this Negro said, 'That was LaRicci's Corner.' So, I guess they knew my feelings. I was anti-nigger then."

"When you were growing up, what did your parents

teach you racially?" I asked.

"They didn't teach me anything racially, because at that time there was really no movement—no Klan movement, no Civil Rights movement," he replied. "Now I do have respect in a way for some colored people. But we're looking at an overall picture and we're looking at the movement today and what's behind it and how it's being forced on us. And *these* are the ones—the agitators and the big-mouth niggers."

In the past, LaRicci had expressed pride in being the first American of Italian descent to become a Grand Dragon. When I asked how he felt about being called "wop," he hesitated. "Well, let's put it this way, it's according to how somebody calls me a 'wop.' Friends and all would call you 'wop,' but I don't mean that way. My name has come out many times publicly and in the back of my head I can just picture two niggers talking and saying 'That goddam wop.' I know this here is taking place although it's not being done in front of me. So how do I look at it?" He

shrugged. "I guess the same way as they would look at it when I speak against them, call 'em 'damn nigger.' So there's a similarity, but, uh, they don't really compare, because there's still a lot of difference between a 'wop' and a 'nigger.'"

Over the years, he had controlled the Klan with as firm a grip as he'd had on that corner, keeping members and outsiders alike in line, and somehow managing to come out on top of every feud. In 1976, LaRicci told a Baltimore Sun reporter: "We will not put up with any insubordination, like somebody getting ambitious all of a sudden. I don't need it." During the Minton struggle, LaRicci had seemed on the verge of toppling, but again, he emerged victorious, and nothing ever came of the embezzlement accusations.

LaRicci viewed the handful of followers and the threatening clouds optimistically: "I'm hoping tonight—if my members support me as I asked them to do—that I will *show* the state of Maryland, especially law officials who say we have only twenty-five or thirty people. I

think this has been disputed because at every rally we never have less than fifty members going around the crosslighting ceremony. But tonight! I estimate a *lot* more than that. I estimate one of our biggest rallies I've ever held here in Maryland."

He paused, then added forcefully, "Tony LaRicci is the Klan!"

As the time for Chaney's plane neared, he could sit still no longer, but paced back and forth and issued orders, checking and rechecking the rally details, giving his security guards and their uniforms a last-minute inspection before they headed for the airport.

"Youse don't have anything on you?" he interrogated one, eyeing the guard's naked belt.

"Everything's locked up," the guard assured LaRicci, slamming the back doors shut. He and two others climbed into the van and drove off, followed by the Grand Dragon and a young man in a mirror-polished car. Left behind, the guys in sweaty tee-shirts and Levi's watched the departure, envious of their assignment. ■